

...that the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, in conjunction with USCIRF and Amnesty International USA, has launched the Defending Freedoms Project to increase attention to and support for human rights and religious freedom around the world?

Through the Defending Freedoms Project, Members of Congress adopt prisoners of conscience and advocate for their release. Sadly, many people today are not free, but languish in jail cells around the world. They are imprisoned because of who they are, what they believe, and how they have chosen to express their convictions. These prisoners of conscience are unjustly prevented from enjoying the most fundamental human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other international human rights standards.

To kick start this project, Representatives Frank Wolf and James McGovern adopted the first two prisoners of conscience. Other Members also have adopted prisoners, with still others signaling their intention to do so. Representative Wolf adopted Gao Zhisheng of China, and Representative McGovern Nabeel Rajab of Bahrain.

Gao Zhisheng is one of the most respected human rights lawyers in China. He has defended activists and religious minorities and documented human rights abuses in China. He has been disbarred and subjected to enforced disappearance, torture, illegal house arrest and detention. China's government imprisons and persecutes individuals for peacefully expressing their views, advocating for democratic reform and human rights, defending the rights of others, and holding religious beliefs or conducting religious activities not sanctioned by the state.

Nabeel Rajab is a prominent human rights activist in Bahrain who has called for and participated in peaceful protests against the government for which he is serving a three-year prison sentence. During the protest, he was assaulted by riot police who punched him several times in the face, head and back. Nabeel Rajab's latest conviction and sentence were handed down while he was already serving a three-month jail sentence in a separate case in relation to a tweet he posted. Rajab is not alone. Scores of prisoners of conscience are incarcerated because they called for meaningful political reforms in Bahrain.